

ILLUSTRATION OF A RE-ENVISIONED 20-MINUTE NEIGHBORHOOD IN ALUM ROCK, SAN JOSÉ  
ILLUSTRATION BY SAM RODRIGUEZ

# Building Blocks Toward 20-Minute Neighborhoods

A case study of the Alum Rock  
neighborhood in San José

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## Introduction

San José, often referred to as the "Capital of Silicon Valley," stands at the forefront of technological innovation and economic prosperity. With a diverse population and a strong regional job market, the city continues to attract residents seeking professional opportunities and a high standard of living. However, the greater Silicon Valley region reports some of the highest percentages of remote workers, and economic prosperity is not evenly distributed. Recent research highlights the continuing income divide and wage gap.<sup>1</sup> Leaders and city staff should look to expansive new and equitable ideas to ensure high quality of living and prosperity in their urban regions and communities.

As a companion to *The 15-Minute Neighborhood*,<sup>2</sup> SPUR's policy brief on delivering the ambitions of the 15-minute city model, SPUR collaborated with SOM to develop a case study of San José's Alum Rock neighborhood using a 20-minute framework. The case study draws upon work completed in 2020 by San José State University's urban planning studio capstone project *Community Priorities for the Alum Rock Corridor*<sup>3</sup> and was supported by recommendations and feedback from a working group of local leaders and community-based organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Silicon Valley Index 2023. <https://jointventure.org/images/stories/pdf/index2023.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The 15-Minute Neighborhood. SPUR. November 2023. [https://www.spur.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/SPUR\\_The\\_15-Minute\\_Neighborhood.pdf](https://www.spur.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/SPUR_The_15-Minute_Neighborhood.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Community Priorities for the Alum Rock Corridor. Capstone Studio in Community Planning 2019-2020. San José State University. <https://www.sisu.edu/urbanplanning/docs/honors-reports/Community%20Priorities%20for%20the%20Alum%20Rock%20Corridor.pdf>



ILLUSTRATION OF A RE-ENVISIONED 20-MINUTE ALUM ROCK AVENUE IN SAN JOSÉ.  
ILLUSTRATION BY SAM RODRIGUEZ

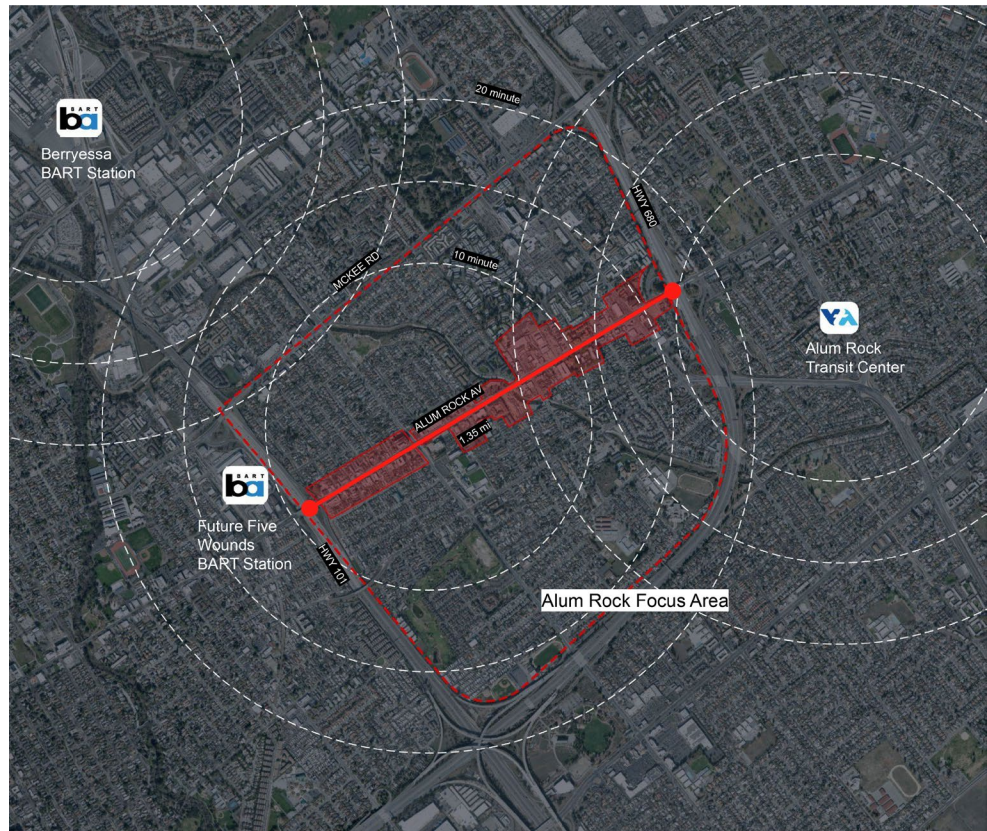
## The 20-Minute Neighborhood

Adopting a 20-minute neighborhood strategy means striving for an urban model that allows everyone — in every neighborhood — to meet most of their daily needs within a short walk or bike ride of their home. This approach aims to create a people-centric city composed of vibrant and self-sufficient neighborhoods, interconnected by efficient public transportation and cycling infrastructure for longer journeys. By decentralizing city life and services, the 15-minute or 20-minute neighborhood model seeks to infuse vitality into local communities throughout the urban landscape. This concept challenges traditional urban planning paradigms that have historically separated residential areas from businesses, retail, industry, and entertainment. However it is not entirely novel: many cities have already embraced elements of this approach, offering valuable lessons and opportunities for further development.

By establishing a baseline as the Alum Rock Urban Village boundary, we set out to study what the 20-minute city concept could offer toward an easily adaptive, positive vision for the future of this community, and by extension, the City of San José.

The Alum Rock focus area is shown within 10-, 15-, and 20-minute radii of walking and biking distance. Beyond close proximity to the future Five Wounds BART station, these expanded radii also include the Alum Rock Transit Center and Berryessa BART station.

Source: SOM



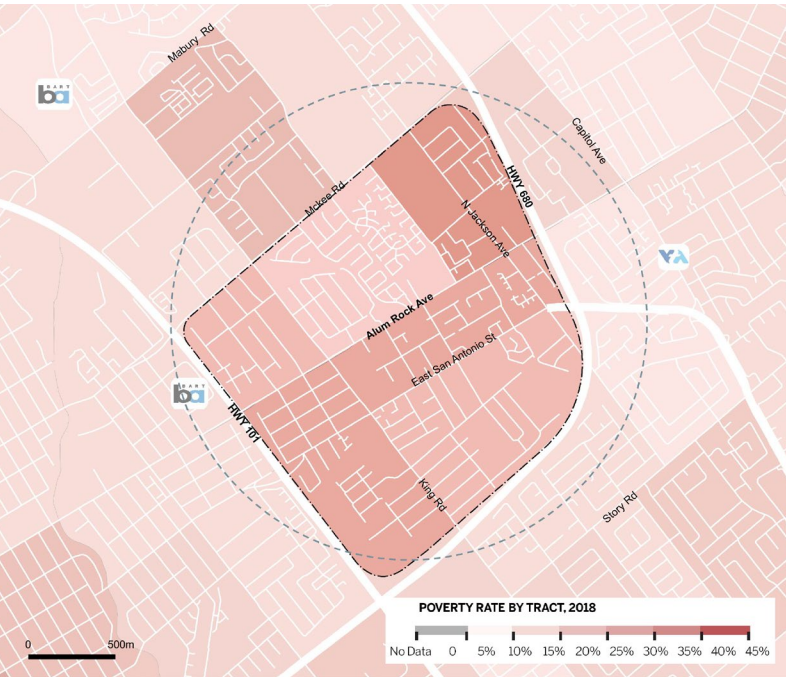
## Alum Rock and San José

San José is geographically vast — second only to Los Angeles and San Diego among California cities — and has far lower population density than cities like New York and Chicago. Nestled within the city, the Alum Rock neighborhood houses a mix of residential areas, commercial establishments, schools, and recreational spaces in close proximity to one another. Alum Rock also surrounds the vibrant neighborhoods of Little Portugal and Mayfair, which hold special significance as Portuguese and Latin American cultural communities. Alum Rock also exemplifies the urban development pattern prominent in the 1970s, which followed suburban elements and car-orientation.

# Alum Rock at a Glance

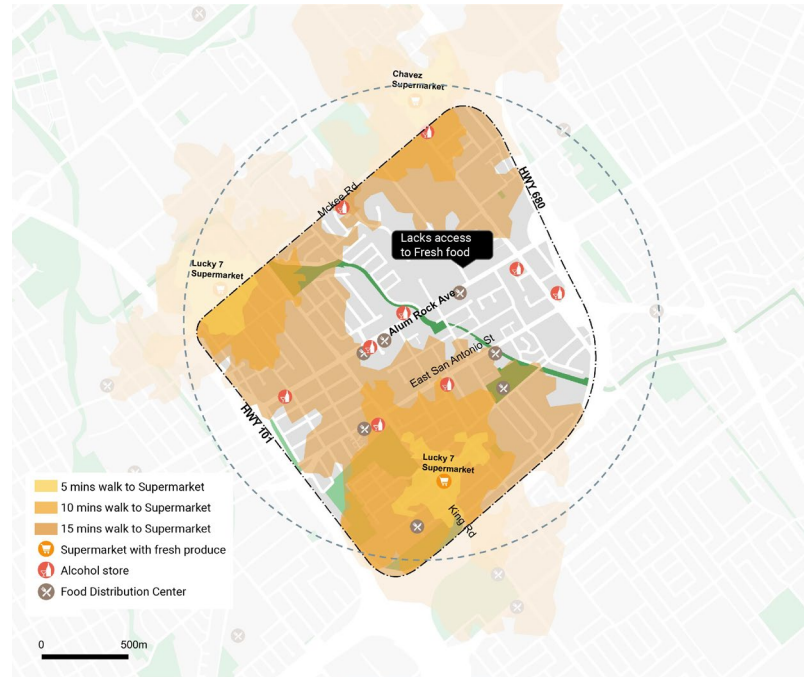
## Poverty Rate by Tract, 2018

Source: SOM



## Food Access

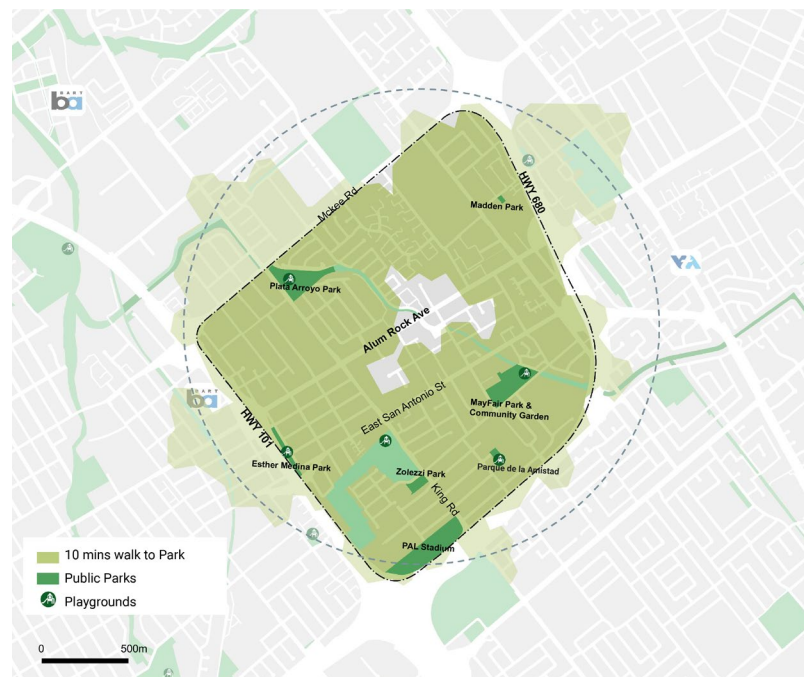
Source: SOM



- Many census tracts here fall within 25% to 35% of the poverty rate.
- Only 20% of residents are within a 10-minute walk of a fresh food grocery store.
- Improving pedestrian access to grocery stores and fresh food could be a priority for enhancing the quality of life within the neighborhood.
- Most of the area is within a 10-minute walk of a neighborhood park.

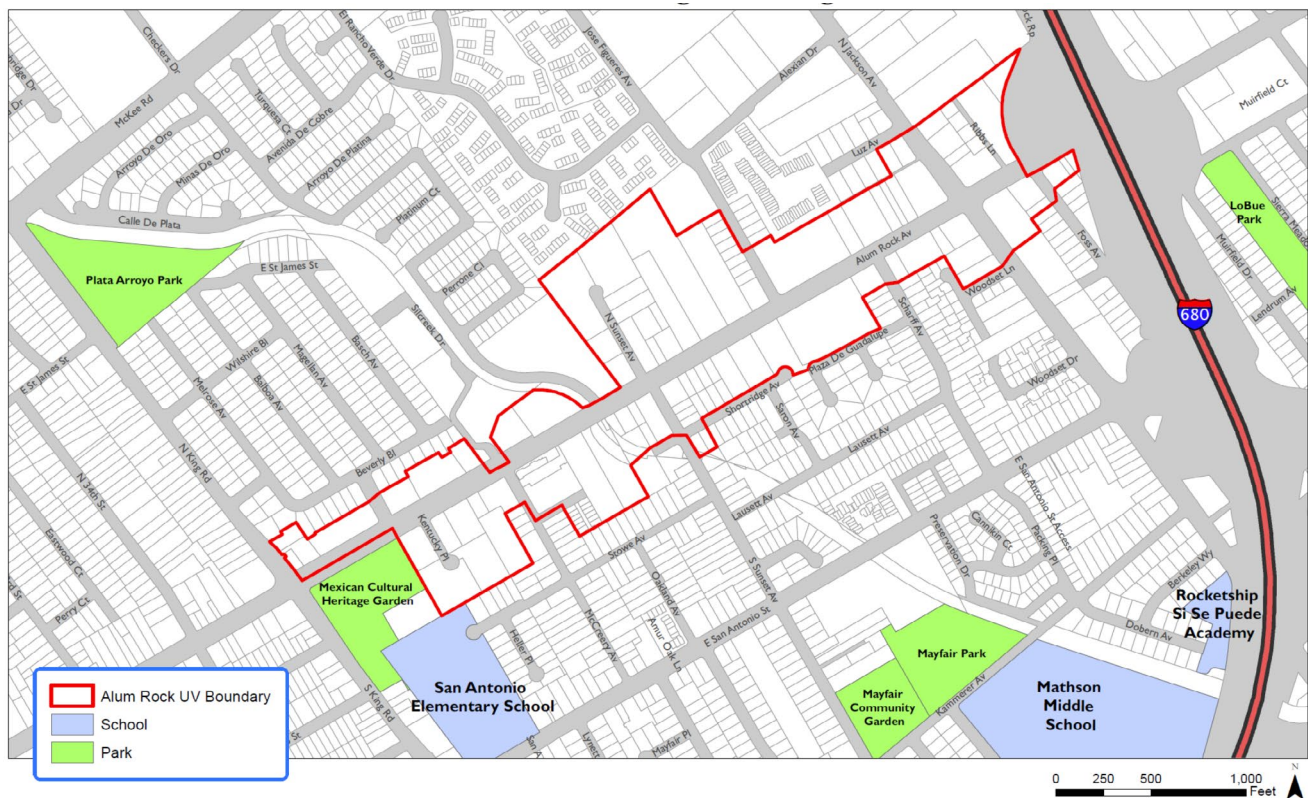
## Parks and Open Space

Source: SOM



# Case Study

Alum Rock is host to a city-approved urban village plan. The city’s urban villages, embedded within the city’s general plan, are a key land use strategy that aims to concentrate sustainable, higher-density, and mixed-use urban growth in primarily commercially zoned locations that are accessible by existing transit or by walking and biking. The Alum Rock Urban Village Plan was approved by the San José City Council in October 2013 and entailed the rezoning of certain land uses between King Road and Highway 680 for ground floor commercial and commercial uses.



The planning area boundary for the Alum Rock Urban Village is self-contained along Alum Rock Avenue’s commercial corridor.

Source: City of San José

In May 2019, San José State University faculty, staff from the District 5 Councilmember’s Office, AARP, SOMOS Mayfair, and a variety of neighborhood organizations launched a research project alongside CommUniverCity to identify community priorities for the local planning processes. The collaborative community engagement project assessed Alum Rock’s current assets and challenges to discover the community’s vision for future development. Importantly, it provides a community-driven baseline of community priorities and desired improvements to amenities and services.

## Urban Villages

The City of San José has planned for urban villages to include a mix of uses for many reasons: to disperse employment, to grow or create clusters of activity, to ensure that retail and other local services are available throughout the city, and to create opportunities for small businesses, small tech firms, and start-ups. Historically, each urban village has had a target for how much commercial square footage the city would like to see, as well as a cap on the number of housing units allowed. Few single-family homes were included in the urban village areas, and the urban village planning strategy was not originally intended to upzone single-family residential designations. Since 2016, the city has developed and approved 14 of a total of 60 designated Urban Villages.

This outreach was intended to help the City of San José prioritize neighborhood improvements that can be leveraged through new development in the focus area of Alum Rock. As an example of the scope of the project, an open house was attended by over 150 people, and the project team captured 587 individual comments about assets, challenges, and the community's long-term vision for progress.

The surveys and outreach methods uncovered strong preferences for a variety of cultural and community resource amenities, including youth and afterschool programs, community centers, libraries, tutoring programs, and workforce development, among other priorities.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, respondents prioritized focus area improvements for community services, programs, and events, alongside addressing housing displacement issues and better safety, streets, and sidewalks.

Based on community priorities, the following framework proposes five strategies to rethink community-scaled planning for 20-minute neighborhoods in San José's Alum Rock neighborhood.

- 1. Cluster Community Amenities and Services**
- 2. Improve Connectivity**
- 3. Create Safe and People-Friendly Streets**
- 4. Embrace a Strong Cultural Identity in the Community**
- 5. Provide Greater Diversity of Housing**

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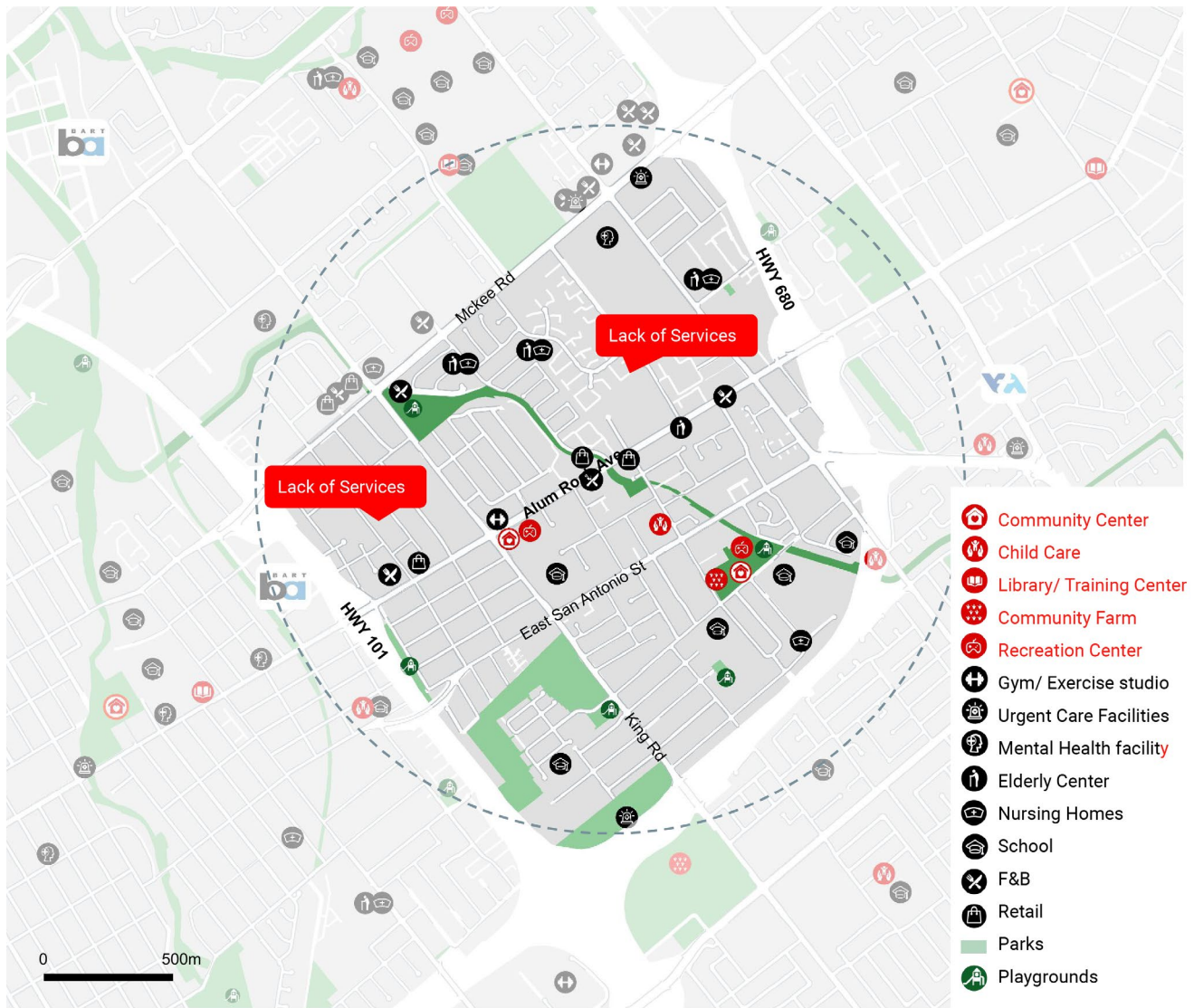
<sup>4</sup> For more on the project's community engagement findings, see San José State University's Community Priorities for the Alum Rock Corridor, page 46. <https://www.sjsu.edu/urbanplanning/docs/honors-reports/Community%20Priorities%20for%20the%20Alum%20Rock%20Corridor.pdf#page=46>

# 1 Cluster Community Amenities and Services

Many of the surveyed and prioritized community amenities and priorities (noted in red on the map) are located to the east of King Road and south of Alum Rock Avenue. Clustering of amenities also occurs along Alum Rock Avenue and near McKee Road. There is a notable lack of services in gap areas that are residentially zoned and that feature cul-de-sacs or dead-end streets, which are common in suburban development patterns.

## Alum Rock Community Amenities and Services

Source: SOM



<sup>5</sup> Blumenberg, Evelyn et al. (2018). Auto-Deficit Households: Determinants, Travel Behavior, and the Gender Division of Household Car Use. Institute of Transportation Studies, UCLA. <https://dot.ca.gov/-/media/dot-media/programs/research-innovation-system-information/documents/final-reports/ca18-3138-finalreport-allv.pdf>



**Clustering Activities**

Source: SOM



**Takeaways**

Encourage the clustering of activities, services, and amenities to increase the efficiency of travel patterns and reduce the burden of making multiple trips. A large body of research<sup>5</sup> has shown that the burden of travel is heavier for auto-deficient households within auto-oriented environments who must attend to a multitude of relatively short trips such as shopping, doctor visits, and more.

We found that the real catchment of a 20-minute walking distance is smaller than the 1-mile radius area. Both Highway 101 and 680 are physical barriers that block walkable, traversable access. In order to address connectivity, more must be improved to serve the needs of residential, commercial, and employment areas within the community.

Additional interventions here should include:

- Prioritization of services to underserved areas
- Improvements to community rideshare, transit service, and pedestrian networks to community amenities and hubs

**Resources:**

[PLAN: Mattapan](#)

[Metro Micro](#)

## 2 | Improve Connectivity

Alum Rock is served by major transit corridors. The Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) operates transit service along the following routes, of which all are part of the city's High Injury Network<sup>6</sup>:

- E Julian Street / McKee Road
- E Santa Clara Street / Alum Rock Avenue
- King Road
- Jackson Avenue

### Street Connectivity

Source: SOM



<sup>6</sup> Denotes streets with a high proportion of automobile-related fatalities and severe injuries.

Like many other neighborhoods in San José, Alum Rock has a number of dead-end streets that do not allow connectivity to major transit corridors. In providing privacy for mostly single-family residential areas, this land use development pattern has created local streets that increase walking time to connective streets. This causes traffic congestion and creates a disincentive for people to walk.

The neighborhood is also poorly served by a disconnected bikeway system, where bike lanes begin and end abruptly and aren't connected as a network. The city has made plans to improve this via the En Movimiento neighborhood transportation plan and future investments in the bike network. However, addressing the lack of direct and safe bike access to the future BART station will be a near-term opportunity to make meaningful advancements in the community's bike and pedestrian network.

The community is also subject to existing unsafe highway crossings that discourage pedestrians and active mobility. Bicycle lanes on the Highway 101 crossing share the road with congested arterials, and there are no safe bike ramps from the highway crossings onto the streets on either side. Instead, bicyclists arrive onto very busy main avenues where they must “share the road” with car, bus, and truck traffic.

**Disconnected Bikeway System**

Source: SOM



## Unsafe Freeway Crossings

Source: GOOGLE / SOM



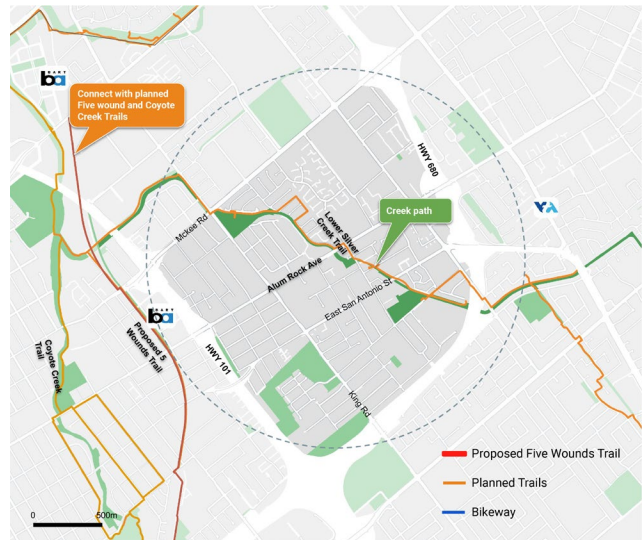
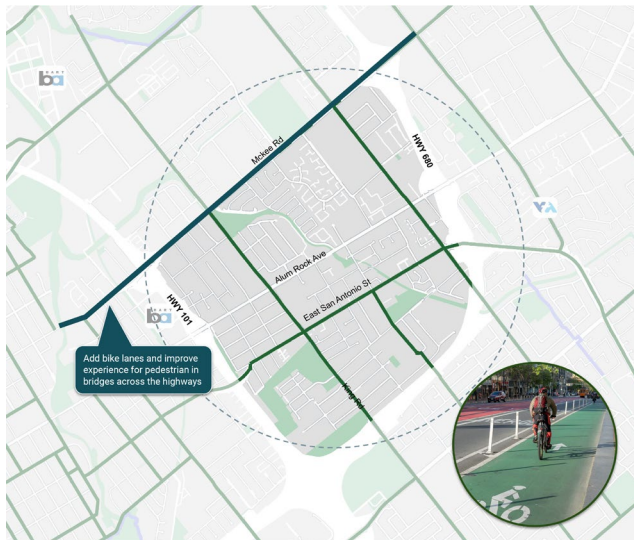
## Takeaways

Alum Rock boasts an existing network of public transportation options, including buses and light rail services, that connect the neighborhood to the broader city. Integrating 20-minute neighborhood planning principles in Alum Rock can capitalize on this well-established infrastructure and encourage even greater usage of public transit, thereby reducing traffic congestion and promoting sustainable commuting habits. By enhancing and expanding public transit networks, including light rail and buses, San José has already taken steps to promote alternative transportation options. Introducing the 20-minute neighborhood approach complements these initiatives and encourages residents to embrace greener, more compact commuting alternatives.

Beyond its transit advancements, San José’s commitment to smart city technologies and environmental initiatives<sup>7</sup> further supports the implementation of the 20-minute neighborhood concept. The city’s emphasis on sustainability, energy efficiency, and green spaces aligns with the goal of creating accessible neighborhoods that prioritize residents’ well-being and ecological balance. Near-term and long-term focus should be to improve connections to the future BART station. For example, there is potential for a pedestrian bridge that connects pedestrians directly to the BART station across the highway barrier to the neighborhoods.

### Safe Bicycle and Pedestrian Connection Over Highways and to the Creek-to-Creek Trail

Source: SOM



<sup>7</sup> For more information about the city’s transportation planning and investments, see Move San José (2022) <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/transportation/projects-planning/move-san-jos>

## Improved Bicycle and Pedestrian Environment

Source: SOM



Near term improvements could focus on the following:

1. Complete the existing bicycle network.
2. Enhance pedestrian and bicycle connection over the highways by expanding protected bike lanes and incorporating these connections in planning processes for King Road and the San Antonio intersection.
3. Improve pedestrian connection to/from the BART station and neighborhood directly.
4. Connect the creek trails with community amenities, and make streetscape improvements for safe walking and biking environments away from major roads.

### Resources:

[Move San José](#)

### 3 | Create Safe and People-Friendly Streets

Unsafe streets pose a significant threat to public safety. Transforming streets to prioritize pedestrians and cyclists — with improved crosswalks, bike lanes, and traffic calming measures — can significantly reduce accidents and injuries. Safer streets also encourage more people to walk or bike, further decreasing car use.

The 20-minute neighborhood model can stimulate economic growth and safety. Transforming surface parking lots into green spaces, affordable housing, and businesses can help the local economy to thrive. People are more likely to patronize local businesses when they can easily access them on foot or by bike. In the study area, a large share of commercial uses are located along the Alum Rock Avenue corridor. Yet, much of the available space along the corridor is set aside for existing public or private parking uses.

#### Parking Uses Along Alum Rock Avenue

Source: SOM



## Takeaways

In large part due to existing parking lots and non-active frontage, the Alum Rock Avenue corridor of today is defined by long stretches of blank walls and fences. Interventions to widen sidewalks and add curb extensions can invite more life and pedestrian activity along this major thoroughfare as new development arrives. Improvements to street furniture and tree shading can also enhance the human-scale experience of the corridor.

In smaller local streets, similar improvements to sidewalk seating and widening — alongside tactical urbanism interventions and pavement texturization — can invite community life and activation along streets.



RE-ENVISIONED STRETCH OF THE ALUM ROCK CORRIDOR.  
ILLUSTRATION BY SAM RODRIGUEZ





RE-ENVISIONED LOCAL COMMUNITY STREET NEAR ALUM ROCK AVENUE.  
ILLUSTRATION BY SAM RODRIGUEZ

Proposed design guidelines and interventions for safer streets:

- Widen sidewalks.
- Locate active frontages along public rights-of-way.
- Separate driveways from pedestrian ROW. (San José Design Guidelines 2.2.2)
- Locate services away from active frontages. (San José Design Guidelines 2.2.3)
- Expand tree canopy cover.
- Expand trees along arterials and neighborhood streets for a better and more comfortable environment and experience.
- Illuminate all active frontages. (San José Design Guidelines 2.3.7)
- Provide welcoming street furniture such as benches, bike racks, etc.

**Resources:**

[Livernois/McNichols Corridor Plan – Fitzgerald Revitalization Project](#)

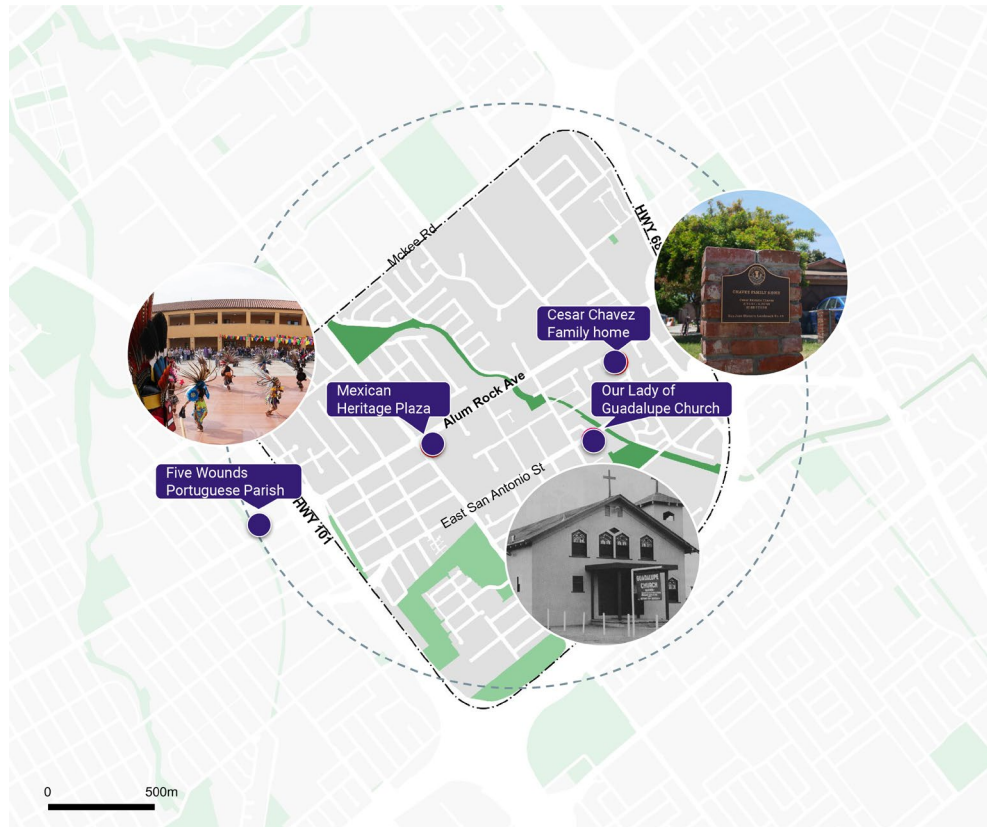
## 4 | Embrace a Strong Cultural Identity in the Community

The Mexican Heritage Plaza, César Chávez Family Home, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, and murals in Alum Rock represent the rich cultural heritage of the community. By integrating these cultural assets into future planning, the city can ensure the preservation and celebration of its history and traditions, fostering a sense of identity and pride among residents. This sense of belonging strengthens social bonds and enhances the overall quality of life.

Notably, the School of Arts and Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza (SOAC) is embarking on a reimagining of its current location. SOAC leadership and community members have launched a community-driven process to build a cultural district and corridor along Alum Rock Avenue and King Road. This effort includes plans to redevelop property for cultural development and expansion. The concept will expand upon SOAC’s current campus by adding affordable housing, commercial space, and a community theater. The corridor project plans will focus on enhancing place; investing in cultural production, arts, and entertainment; and anchoring cultural institutions.

### Cultural Landmarks

Source: SOM



## Takeaways

There are a number of opportunities underway to recognize and enshrine the cultural heritage of the Alum Rock, Little Portugal, and Mayfair communities. These can be expanded by aligning public and private efforts that could include existing assets such as:

- Celebrate and encourage murals in communities. Alum Rock has several existing Portuguese and Mexican murals that reflect a rich history and more could be added.
- Create an Alum Rock cultural district or heritage trail to honor and celebrate cultural assets within the community. The many anchors and institutions in Alum Rock and its surroundings include the Five Wounds Portuguese Parish, Mexican Heritage Plaza, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Cesar Chavez Family Home, and the Silver Creek Trail.

### Embracing Cultural Identity in the Community

Source: SOM



### Resources:

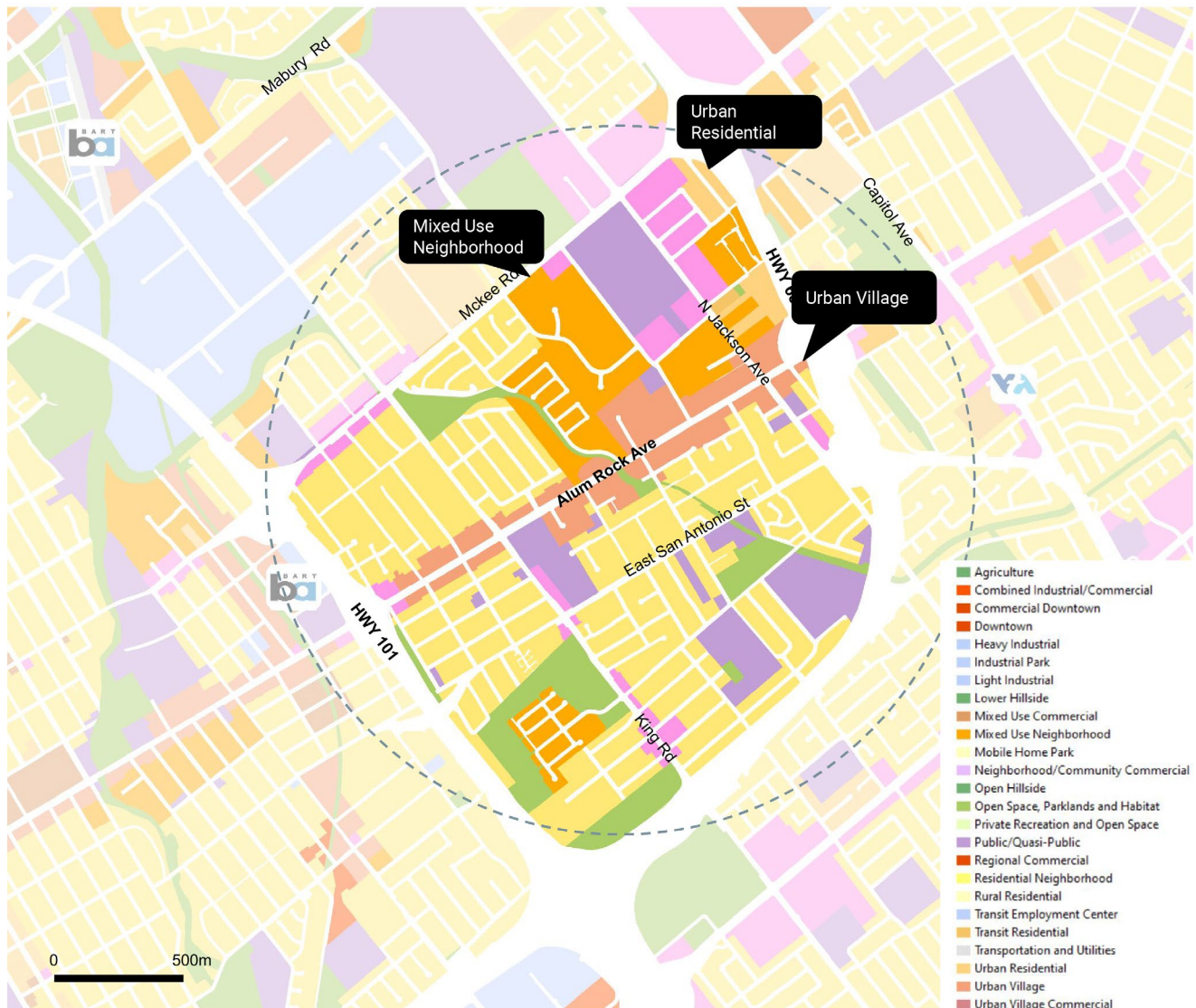
- [Memphis 3.0 Comprehensive Plan](#)
- [Charlotte 2040 Comprehensive Plan](#)

# 5 | Provide Greater Diversity of Housing

The Envision San José 2040 General Plan, adopted in 2011, designated this segment of Alum Rock Avenue as an urban village. The northeast area of Alum Rock Avenue is zoned for mixed use neighborhood and urban residential designations, which allow higher density residential and commercial development. Much of the remaining footprint within the study area is dominated by residential neighborhood patterns, typically single-family.

## Alum Rock in San José's General Plan 2040

Source: SOM

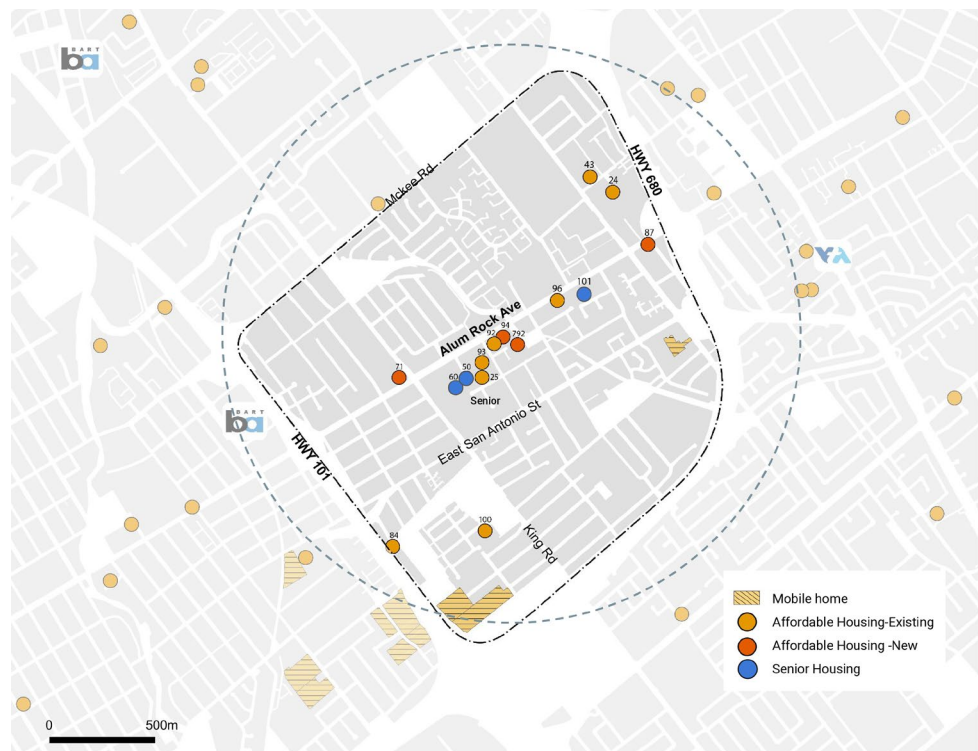


## Takeaways

The city continues to grapple with a housing crisis, as does the rest of the state. Affordable housing should increase alongside new housing development. On Alum Rock Avenue, newer developments like Quetzal Gardens at King Road, completed in 2021, have added 70 affordable units to the area’s housing stock, as well as adding commercial space where community-based organization SOMOS Mayfair is co-located with the Latino Business Foundation of Silicon Valley and Excite Credit Union. However, more housing is needed in order to meet San José’s production goals.<sup>8</sup> The city’s target is for 15% or more of new housing stock to be developed as affordable. San José should pursue anti-displacement and infill housing policies that will serve the needs of individuals and families of all income levels, including seniors and students.<sup>9</sup>

### Affordable Housing Within the Study Area

Source: SOM



### Resources:

[The Missing Middle Neighborhood Kit](#) (Opticos Housing)

[Discovering and Developing Missing Middle Housing](#) (AARP)

<sup>8</sup> City of San José Affordable Housing Dashboard. <https://www.sanjoseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/housing/resource-library/affordable-housing-dashboard>

<sup>9</sup> For more on SPUR’s housing agenda for San José and its urban villages, see Room for More (2017) and It Takes A Village (2019): <https://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2017-08-24/room-more> and <https://www.spur.org/publications/white-paper/2019-11-19/it-takes-village>

## Conclusion

Cities are a reflection of society's values, and they have been shaped by powerful financial incentives, massive public investment, and strict rules defining how land and roads can be developed and used. Many of today's urbanized regions are typified by dispersed land uses, highway networks, and under-resourced public assets. The growing interest in the 15-minute or 20-minute neighborhood, where everyone can meet most, if not all, of their needs within a short walk or bike ride from home, seeks to counteract these trends.

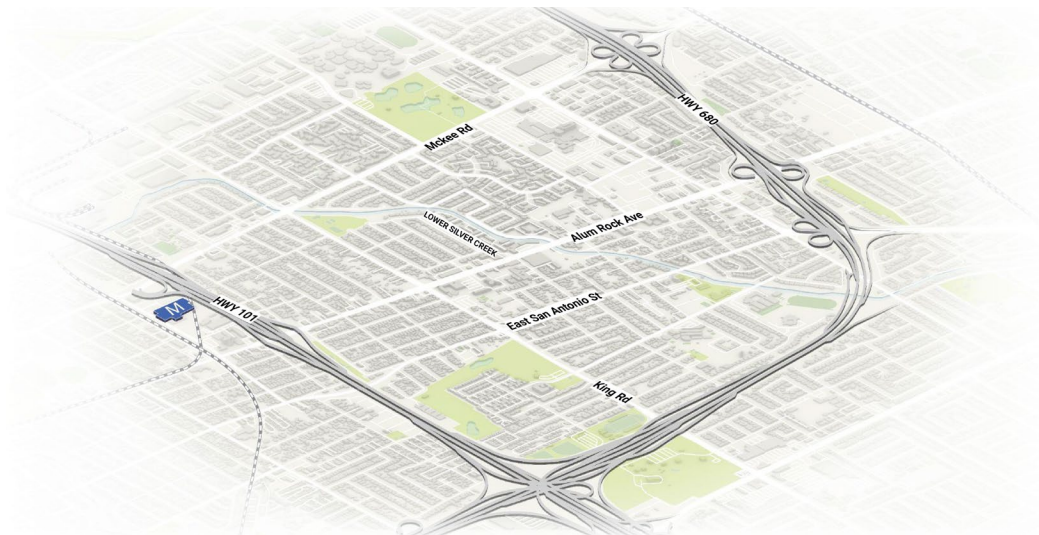
Many suburban, auto-oriented cities across the world have taken up the 20-minute neighborhood model to reframe major planning initiatives and public investment. It can offer powerful tools<sup>10</sup> for city leaders and staff to reorient the future of housing, transportation, sustainability, and economic opportunity by increasing the density and diversity of uses around urban neighborhood hubs like Alum Rock. While the 20-minute model aligns with San José's vision to create a sustainable and resilient urban environment for its residents<sup>11</sup>, maximizing this type of context-sensitive planning approach will require shifting course from a landscape dominated by single-family homes to one that works to address the entrenched housing shortage and put an end to displacement. This framework offers a viable path forward for retrofitting urban landscapes in ways that answer today's needs for equitable growth and more complete communities.

## Rethinking Community Scale and Planning in Alum Rock

Over time, San José can take steps to strengthen Alum Rock's bike and pedestrian connections, cluster activities, and increase housing density, ultimately resulting in a future "20-minute" neighborhood.

### Alum Rock Today

Source: SOM



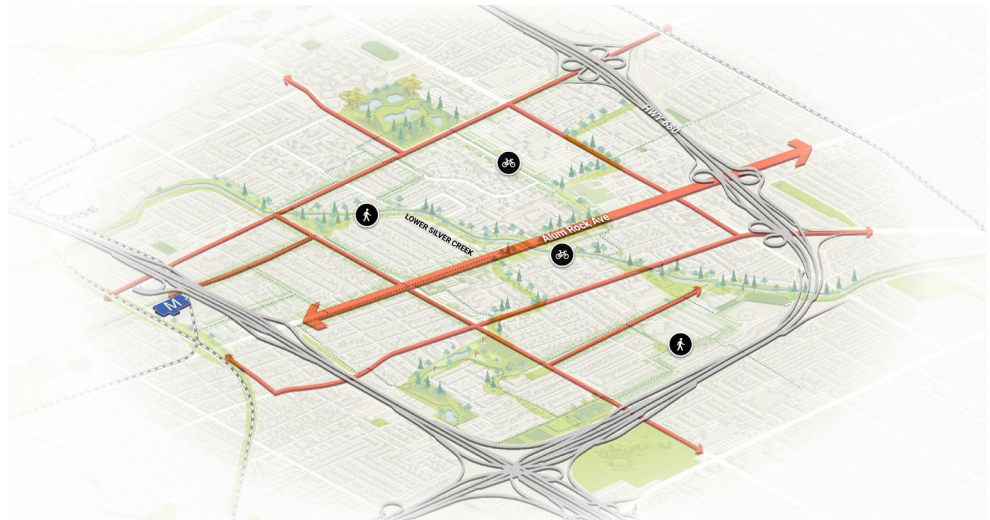
<sup>10</sup> For more information, see Building 15-Minute Communities: A Leadership Guide by the Urban Land Institute. <https://knowledge.uli.org/-/media/files/research-reports/2023/ulireportbuilding15minutecommunitiesleadershipguidefinal-august-2023.pdf?rev=2203507a714448e7b8a155c1d5cdeb02&hash=B63F63FBFA06F108BA151F0832792ACD>

<sup>11</sup> See Climate Smart Workplan, City of San José <https://www.sanioseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/environmental-services/climate-smart-san-jos#:-:text=To%20get%20there%2C%20Climate%20Smart,by%202030%20in%20June%202022> and Envision 2040 General Plan, City of San José <https://www.sanioseca.gov/your-government/departments-offices/planning-building-code-enforcement/planning-division/citywide-planning/envision-san-jos-2040-general-plan>

### Alum Rock "Connected" Neighborhood

By reconnecting creek trails with bike and pedestrian priority streets, and by improving the street network and environment, Alum Rock can be a more walkable and connected neighborhood.

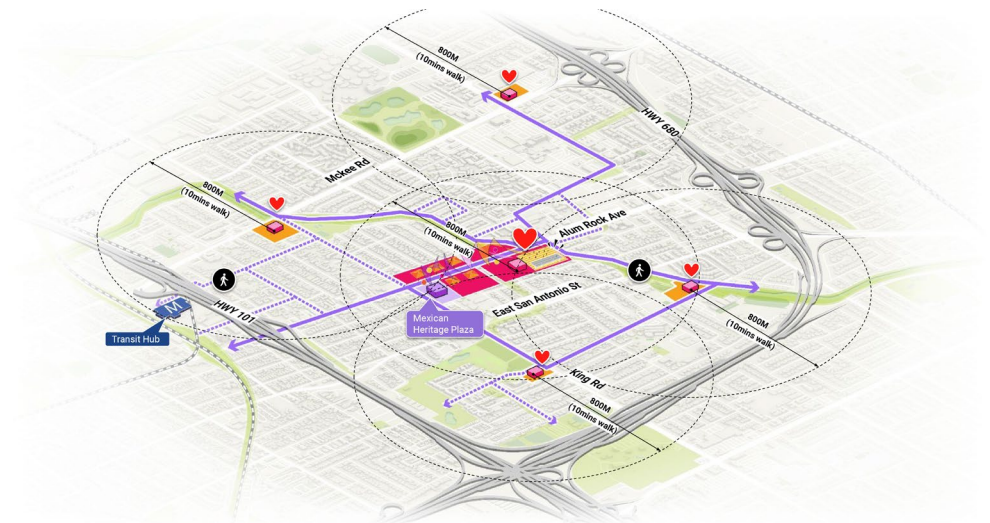
Source: SOM



### Alum Rock "Community-Priority" Neighborhood

By co-locating community priority amenities and linking them with major streets, Alum Rock can have a stronger community identity.

Source: SOM



### Alum Rock "Vibrant" Neighborhood

By increasing housing density along corridors and in the broader area, the neighborhood can become more vibrant with more people.

Source: SOM



### Future Alum Rock "20-Minute" Neighborhood

Source: SOM





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# Acknowledgments

The findings and recommendations of this study are SPUR's and do not necessarily reflect the views of those listed below. Any errors are the author's alone.

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